



The Role of Possessions in Constructing and Maintaining Past

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THE ROLE OF POSSESSIONS IN CONSTRUCTING AND MAINTAINING A SENSE OF P

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In the little houses the tenant people sifted their belongings and the belongings of their fathers and grandfathers. Picked over their possessions for the journey to the west. The men were ruthless because the past had been spoiled, but the women knew how the past would cry to them in the coming days.

The women sat among the doomed things, turning them over and looking past them and back. The father had it. He liked a book. Pilgrim's Progress Used to read it. Got his name in it. And his pipe-rank. And this picture--an angel. I looked at that before the fust three come--didn't seem to do much. Think we could get this china dog in? Aunt Sadie brought it from the St. Louis Fair. See? Wrote right guess not. Here's a letter my brother wrote the day before he died.... No, there isn't room. How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past? (Steinbeck 1939, pp. 117, 120)

The notion of the extended self suggests that we transcend the immediate confines of our bodies by incorporating elements from our physical environment (Belk 1988). This conception implies that the self is spatially enlarged by such extensions and make us bigger people. However, there is another dimension in which self may be extended: the dimension of time.

defined by our immediate circumstances, we are defined by our pasts and our futures. The self may be temporarily announce that we once completed a marathon in under three hours or that we are studying to be a doctor. We are in some circles, by having a lineage that can be traced to the Mayflower or having grandchildren named after us, enlarged by having visited the National Museum of American History or having heirloom silverware that we play with. Of the past and future directions in which self may be extended, the present focus is primarily on the past. Having a sense of past implies that we are able to clearly define ourselves and ground our identity in previous personal or group

Various forms of amnesia show what happens if instead we are able to think about ourselves only in the present. In one case he labels "the lost mariner," Oliver Sacks (1985) reveals Jimmie G. who has no memory except for the past few years up to 1945 when he was serving in the U.S. Navy. He thinks World War II has just ended and is baffled by the mirror. He meets his doctor anew each day and has no memory of prior meetings. He is intelligent and can carry out tasks quickly gets lost in chess because the moves are too slow. When he meets his brother, Jimmie is baffled by his brother having any recent past, Jimmie has lost all sense of time, continuity with his past, and ability to envision his future for himself

Even those of us without amnesia lose or fail to recall parts of our past. For this reason our life history is often re-announced by objects (e.g., Olson 1985). Photographs, souvenirs, trophies, and more humble everyday objects anchor our memories and meanings in our lives. The present paper theoretically explores how such objects aid in creating a sense of past in our lives. The theoretical structure presented has been developed with the aid of fieldwork from the author and several subsequent studies (see Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988, Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, Kassarjian and Wallendorf 1987). Due to space constraints however, the present paper presents only the relevant background literature rather than fieldwork.

THE INDIVIDUAL REIFIED PAST

Security Objects

"Why," asks Tooley (1978, p. 176) "do we keep one earring, three foreign coins (total value 30¢), a jacket far too small for us again?" The immediate answer likely to suggest itself is that such objects are kept for sentimental value which helps in preserving memories of our past. But why should we want to preserve our past? Why use possessions to preserve memories? Why do objects allow us to accurately recall our pasts? Beyond the necessity of having a sense of past in order to achieve the goals that Jimmie G. lacks, there are other reasons that Western society deems a sense of past to be important. We tend to struggle with having a past when our current identity has been challenged, as may be the case with a divorce (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, p. 212), a mid-life identity crisis (Davis 1979, p. 40), feelings of inferiority (Stillinger 1980), states of excessive self-doubt (Arendt 1969), and lack of confidence in the future (Moriarty and McGann 1983). For as McCracken (1988) eloquently notes

Surrounded by our things, we are constantly instructed in who we are and what we aspire to. Surrounded by our things, we are rooted in and visually continuous with our pasts. Surrounded by our things, we are protected from the many forces that would deflect us into new concepts, practices, and experiences. These forces include our own acts of imagination, the constructions of others, the shock of personal tragedy, and our own forgetfulness. As Arendt has suggested, things are our ballast. They stabilize us by reminding us of our past, making this past a virtual, substantial part of our present (p. 124).

The role of possessions in these cases is not only to act as ballast to keep us stable, but to serve as familiar transitional objects, a child's security blanket, provide us a sense of support as we confront an uncertain future. It is this apparent function that World War II photography as servicemen were provided and sought to carry with them snapshots as memorabilia for their families, and their lives in prior times of peace (King 1984). These objects also served as hopeful reminders that despite ruptures the "flow" of time and that someday "normal" peacetime, loved ones, and familiar activities would be returned to its proper channel.

Preserving Our Past

Objects of the past are often intentionally acquired and retained in order to remember pleasant or momentous

and mementos are intentionally selected to act as tangible markers for retrospective memories in the future. The staple of travel guides and souvenirs commonly tangibilize the tourist experience. They not only allow us to confront ourselves, but they may allow us the conversational cue for telling others about it (Gordon 1986, Cybart 1988). Since taken especially during seasonal holidays, rites of passage such as graduations, weddings, and anniversaries, vacations during infancy, are meant to serve as edited markers and stimuli for future reflection, communication, and conservation. Chalfen (1987) calls the more than 11 billion amateur photos taken in the U.S. each year an investment in creating a record. (1981) notes that the development of amateur photography provided nineteenth century poor and middle class a way to preserve family heritage as could formerly be done only by those rich enough to bequeath heirlooms and estate to their families. With the mobility of twentieth century North American families, photographs now seem to serve a new respect.

But as objects for retrospective reflection, photographs (along with home movies and videotapes) may act in a way opposite to that of other possessions. Whereas possessions like furniture, houses, and clothing may act as unchangeable security of the familiar in our lives, photographs remind us of who we once were in a way that invites comparison. Things have changed. We may not be wholly different people, since features, expressions, and mannerisms tend to be remarkably undeniable. Other possessions may mark the passage of time by becoming stylistically outdated, physically worn, or repainting, dying, or rearranging, but these changes do not as directly imply that we have changed. The objects we see change slowly and imperceptibly. Only when we see these objects in old photographs or through the eyes of an informant that they, like the people who are the normal focus of our photographic records, have changed. Another exception is associated with a past event. Athletic trophies, awards, wedding gifts, clothing bought for a special occasion, and other objects (often associated with rites of passage) are more likely to act as reminders of temporal discontinuity than our favorite chair, our familiar dinner dishes, and our favorite sweater (as long as it is still serviceable and fits) all through our lives. They provide an embracing feeling of warmth that McCracken (1989) calls homeyness.

Nostalgia and Memory

The objects that McCracken sees as participating in feelings of homeyness (e.g., crafts, knickknacks, books, seasonal decorations) are also likely to participate in feelings of nostalgia. Nostalgia has been described as a bittersweet emotion in which the pleasure and sadness and longing (Davis 1979, Starobinski 1966, Stewart 1984).

Cognitive Versus Emotional Memories The first important characteristic of nostalgia is that it involves an emotional memory process. It is a wistful mood that may be prompted by an object, a scene, a smell, or a strain of music.

The nostalgic sentiments are less well understood. Although abundantly represented in literature and art, they have found no appropriate place in social theory. Nostalgic sentiments being incommensurate with hedonistic calculus, are regarded as somewhat removed from the hard logic of nature and touchstones like moonlight and summer madness (p. 8).

Neisser (1982) suggests that another barrier to understanding emotional nostalgic memories is that the vast majority have been in artificial contexts that may bear little relation to remembering in natural contexts.

Sacred Memories A second important characteristic of nostalgia, as suggested by recent naturalistic studies, is that the nostalgically recalled are sacred times (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Especially when they are involuntarily recalled are mysterious, powerful (kratophanous), unexpected (hierophanous), mythical, and prompt feelings of ecstasy. These elements that seem to fascinate Proust (1981; originals 1913/1927) in his 3000+ page self-reflective novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, more than objects of nostalgia serving as simple cues to propositional memories involving knowledge that something occurred. They provoke rich textural memories involving knowledge of the experience recalled (Belk 1986, Langer 1963). For Proust, the textural detail are clearly evident in the three volumes of memories that well forth from the cup of tea and little round cake his mother served him (actually the mother of the novel's Marcel) one day during his ill health:

I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are not captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and thus effecting

until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison...And as soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of madeleine which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and I had not yet postulate the discovery of why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house with its garden in front of it, the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the roads we took when it was fine. And...so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. S. and the water-lilies on the Vivone and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being like gardens alike, from my cup of tea (1981, 1, pp. 47, ' 51).

With sacred nostalgic memories evoked by sacred possessions, it is not so much that these objects "stand for" past in a documentary fashion, as that they are the stimuli for an evolving network of vivid memories; that is, they "lead to" an interwoven net that grows rich in associations, moods, and thoughts.

Imagining the Past. A third significant aspect of nostalgic memories is that, rich and evocative as they are, they are of the past, imaginary rather than "real". As Mead observes, "...the past (or some meaningful structure of the past) is a fiction" (1932, p. 12; see also Mead 1929, Lynch 1972, Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983). Mementos, souvenirs, photographs that may evoke the past for us, are all dumb objects that provide only mute and shapeless testimony that there were things. How we interpret these objects do they have meaning. And like our selectivity in deciding which of these possessions we keep (Larsen and Seilman 1988), we also selectively interpret our hypothetical past in a way that is most pertinent to us, just as we unavoidably do (Larsen and Seilman 1988). As with most fiction reading and all of our approaches to the sacred, we dwell on the past for the sake rather than for some utilitarian purpose (Lowenthal and Prince 1976). Just as Proust comes to realize that it is not the tea that contains his memories, but rather is himself, we must realize that our things are the incarnation of our past to the extent that we can bring them to life through the reflections and interpretations that they stimulate.

It is this imaginary character of our nostalgic memories that allows us to use the past as a safe haven to which we can retreat our ideals (McCracken 1988). Our mythical images of a golden age of childhood, the good old days, or our carefree childhood, good and we were our ideal selves, help explain our fondness for adult collections of childhood objects such as teddy bears (Schlereth 1985). It further accords with Kant's contention that the feeling of nostalgia is a longing for the past (Starobinski 1966). And it also accounts for what Tooley (1978) sees as the ideal treasure trove of personal objects

...souvenirs and bottle caps and trophies and photographs and baseball cards and sea shells and other things--collections--things that have symbolic value in their own right (coins), things that have the capacity to stimulate pleasant memories, and things that reinforce a treasured mythology of the self, things that recall a former version of a self overlooked in the press of the daily and present self; things that recall a happiness obliterated by the weight of current unhappiness; things to be touched fondly, turned over and over, returned to the box, which is in turn shoved back into storage (p. 174).

Authenticity One final significant aspect of nostalgic memories may seem to contradict the preceding one. Even though our memories are essentially un-real and imaginary rather than objective and inherent in the objects that inspire them, we insist upon the authenticity of these objects, and insist that unauthentic, faked, or forged objects cannot possibly contain "the real thing." This apparent contradiction is best understood in terms of the nature of the sacred. As MacCracken (1988) notes, the very shallowness and artificiality of our lives that causes us to seek the authentic. Restated, it is the ordinary profane that causes us to seek the sacred. This restatement is supported by the (sacred) characteristics thought by Baugh (1988): when it manifests itself to us and creates epiphany (hierophany), it is able to transform the world (kratophany), it is total and causes us to suspend our perception of the everyday world (transcendence). However, the additional sacred element that is most useful for understanding why we insist upon authentic objects from our past. Because the sacred is contagious, it contaminate only the objects that were present during its occurrence, inauthentic, faked, or forged objects lack the sacred. A similar wedding ring, a photograph of a similar family's Thanksgiving feast, or a car that is like the one that once provoked a brief nostalgic flashback, but they are clearly inferior to and would hardly be traded for "the real thing."

a person who looked just like Woody Allen is to say much less than saying we once met the real Woody Allen.

This desire for authenticity is time and culture specific. Only in the past several hundred years has Western culture original and abhor the copy (Orvell 1989, Trilling 1971). The rise of interest in this sort of authenticity appears to individualism in Western culture (Belk 1984, Handler 1986). It is also within this temporal and cultural frame that regarded as a property of the sacred.

Antiques and Old Things

The items considered to this point are those that are intimately connected to our personal past in some way. The creating and maintaining a sense of past is easier to appreciate than the role of other old objects and antiques that part of our personal past. If these objects are heirlooms from our family's past, they aid in aggregate identity as well. But if they are merely old things, even if others consider them sacred or valuable, how can they play a role in our answer this question we must go beyond McCracken's (1988) concept of displaced meaning, since rather than keep distance, the collector of old things ("owner" seems too dispassionate) seeks to bring it closer. A more useful perspective is the stipulation that the past, and especially the nostalgic past, is imaginary. Because of this hypothetical quality, we part of our identity from objects and time periods to which we have not previously been connected. By coming to time periods we may come to feel we have knowledge of what it was like to have been a part of them. Their "otherworldly" superior artistry, and survival in spite of fragility, make them more extraordinary and sacred than objects of the world. In ourselves upon the life of such objects we extend our identity to encompass what we imagine their original era to be.

Hillier (1981) speaks of collecting antiques as an attempt at "conjuring up the past," based on the hope that "a part of us has absorbed something of an earlier time, something which we may be able to distil from it" (pp. 71, 78). In this sense the antique is an object or talisman. Some antique collectors, in an apparently projective attempt to establish an even closer connection, suggest that an antique "speaks" to them because they have had some connection with it in a former life (Cherry 1981).

THE AGGREGATE REIFIED PAST

Self is comprised not only of our individual identities, but also of more aggregate levels such as family, work organization, and community (Belk 1988). What applies at the individual level, also applies at these aggregate level. Americans who once prided themselves on being unencumbered by the past, have become as active as anyone in enshrining their material past in museums, archives, and monuments. Things offer a proof that the past was real and regains its meaningful:

Americans must not dismiss the endless viewing of Lenin's refrigerated body and the preservation of saints as alien superstitions. These, like Dolly Madison's gown, Benjamin Franklin's printing press, and George Washington's uniform, are more than curiosities. They provide direct, three-dimensional access to the past. For individuals who otherwise exist only as abstractions (Hindle 1978, p. 6).

National, Regional, and Local Possessions

Just as individual antique collectors may appropriate senses of pasts in which they have not directly participated, nations may appropriate pasts that are not their own. This may be done by imitation as with classical architecture in public buildings and clothing on public statues, or it may be done more directly by acquiring the art and artifacts of another culture. Cultural appropriation may involve classical works like the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum or "primitive" works like the Benin Bronzes in the Smithsonian collection (Cole, 1985, Meyer 1973). Whereas the acquisition of the classical works attempts to establish a lineage to the past and appropriate its imagined glories, the acquisition of "primitive" works is more a statement of the superiority of the acquiring nation (Chamberlin 1979). From the point of view of the nation whose heritage has been transferred, however, these transfers often amount to a theft of national selfhood. Repatriation attempts, such as Greece's claim on the Parthenon marbles and Nigeria's claim on the Ashanti regalia also held by the British Museum, are not often successful however, despite the fact that:

These antiquities are the only authentic objects which illustrate and illuminate the course of our culture. This is vital to us as a people, as it enables us to establish our identity, and hence restores our dignity.

The same concern with magic, sacredness, and authenticity that we invoke in personal possessions is also an imp national, regional, and local possessions. Walter (1988) depicts a cup that seems suitable for coffee or tea and no possessed of low energy, until it's heritage is revealed and our perceptions change:

However, when we learn that the cup is made of amber and...may be as old as 1500 B. C., the ene We marvel that the shape of the humble teacup claims such remote antiquity, but the fabric of th even more wonder than the form. Amber, to prehistoric folk, was a sacred substance. It was valu gold (p. 73).

As Stewart (1984) explains, part of this new reverence is because we see the modern as cold and sterile while the But a part of the status of antiquities housed in museums is due to the authentication and sacralization that take objects to the museum. Not only is the museum a sacred temple of modern society (Rheims 1961), but sacraliza object from ordinary use and transferring it to the context of other sacred objects (Belk, et al. 1988).

Over the "life" of a significant object, a number of sacred and profane transformations may take place before it (1975) illustrates with a hypothetical warrior's sword. As an object that the warrior views as both a sign of social of survival, the sword may obtain personal sacred status for him. Upon his death if the sword does not become society's priests may obtain it as a sacred symbol of the spirit of the warrior. When the society falls and the swor enters the profane world. And when anthropologists finally obtain the object and transfer it to a museum, it is on still another system of meaning. We might also note that in each step in this social biography of the sword it bec from its original context, being first appropriated by a more aggregate local society and ultimately by a totally fo

While archaeological, anthropological, and historical museums are those that may seem most relevant to collect aggregate sense of past, natural history museums, art museums, and museums of science and industry perform museums are not the only repositories of sense of past at the local through national levels of self. Data collector popular culture studies, and a variety of other disciplines also archive our past. So do libraries, historical societie mark permanent graves rather than recycling the land for other burials. As Shapiro (1985) documents, the impet each of these repositories occurred during the midnineteenth century in the U.S.. Prior to this time, the view of l less linear and more cyclical. This difference is seen more clearly however in the contrast of present view of usin desired identities versus the medieval European view of a changeless social order and an irrevocable past (Mead preceding civilizations, preserving the past in public institutions was not encountered (Lowenthal 1985, p. 365).

An aggregate sense of past implies a collective memory (Halbwachs 1950). There is some evidence that the salier generation (Schuwn and Scott 1989). The period of late adolescence and early adulthood when adult identity is c prominent source of generational memories. This seems to account for the different musical preferences of diff and Schindler 1989) and the different eras of collectibles preferred by those who have reached midlife (Davis 197 generation-specific.

Family Heirlooms

Unlike anonymous antiques, monuments, landmarks, and museum artifacts, family heirlooms have been directl and families during their past. Such heirlooms are not universal in a society, but are restricted to higher social cl likely to have furnishings, jewelry, silver, collectibles, paintings, objects d'art, and even articles of clothing to pass 1950), although middle class families who have remained in one place over several generations may also have so 1988, chapter 3). U.S. blacks who are descended from former slave families may have oral traditions, but have be multigeneration material cultures (Haley 1976). Although it is most common to think of traditional peoples as pe (e.g., Bateson 1958), there is also a material heritage in groups like the Aranda of Australia (Strethlow 1947). In fa Aranda, tjurunga objects are thought to be the embodiment of ancestors and are hoarded as most treasured po

Having family heirlooms, collections, or other significant possessions that children or grandchildren are willing t sense of familial self continuity that extends beyond death. Barthes (1984) reflects after his mother's death that h

powder box, a cut-crystal flagon, a low chair, raffia panels, and the large bags she loved. Even when families do not survive for succeeding generations, the continued existence of childhood home and other important objects may provide a form of immortality. When these objects are instead destroyed, we lose a part of our past, a part of our selves:

A picture of Barney's childhood home hung just inside the entrance of his own home. The picture had been bequeathed to his father when his father was a child. Though the house and the land had long since been sold outside the family, Barney expressed dismay when he told me of the experience of driving by the house before and finding it "wiped out." His voice quavered and tears came to his eyes as he told me the story.

The darn thing, last time I was up there, they even stripped the house out of there. The old home, I thought the thing would stand forever. That's what happens to everything; nothing comes of nothing. (Boschetti 1986,p. 42).

CONCLUSIONS

Previous studies of time in consumer research have ignored the role of possessions in creating and maintaining a sense of self. The past is essential to a sense of self. The self extends not only into the present material environment, but extends forward into the future. Possessions can be a rich repository of our past and act as stimuli for intentional as well as unintentional recollection. To undertake as comprehensive a life history review as Proust, our memories constitute our lives; they are us. We find that what is accumulated somewhere among the material artifacts our lives have touched--in our homes, our museums, and our collections--that if these objects can only be made to reveal their secrets, they will reveal the meanings and mystery of ourselves.

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